# Politically Correct Shakespeare

Cover image for Henry V (Signet), Milton Glaser, 1960s

**The universal Shakespeare changes with** a politically correct era. I discovered this when a book of mine on social class was published by a reputable American firm. American copy-editors are a notorious breed, the literary equivalent of pit bulls. Mine was malignantly opposed to language that smacked of sexism, or perpetuated the class divisions I wrote about. The three words that drove my copy-editor to fury were *lady*, *mistress* and *man*. I had used these provocative terms rather often.

*Lady* (and *ladies*) may give offence in current social usage. The *Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals*, for example, disapproved of 'lady lawyer' and would substitute 'female lawyer.' But Shakespeare is the past, and the word has fixed standing. Does one retain it? In the text, necessarily. There's no choice. The dramatis personae are something else, because these lists are made up by editors. Only seven plays in the Folio come with dramatis personae (there are none in the quartos), and all require a judgment to be made. What does one call Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*? Dover Wilson chose 'a lady of Belmont.' Today's editors have dropped this provocation, replacing it with 'an heiress,' or, rather oddly, 'a rich heiress.' (Can you have an heiress who isn't rich?) *Ladies* are out, except (in the New Cambridge) as a direct allusion to the Third Quarto's 'the rich Italian lady.' I had to work for *lady* in my MS, even in 'my lady's chamber' (presumably because disadvantaged readers might be deprived of nursery rhymes).

Much worse turbulence had as its epicentre *mistress*. This word has now the singular property of being inappropriate wherever applied. Nobody admits to being a mistress, much less to having one. It is felt to imply ownership, and to cast doubt on the independence and moral standing of the person so called. Burchfield (*Modern English Usage*) prefers to look the other way. But what is a Shakespearean, even of a pacific nature such as mine, to do with Timandra and Phrynia? These,

er, women put in an appearance in the 4th act of *Timon of Athens*. They accompany Alcibiades, the victorious warlord whose campaign is taking him to the gates of Athens. I cannot help my suspicion that their relationship with Alcibiades involves money and sex, in what order it would be imprudent to speculate. Alcibiades is of a great military tradition that extends to Kutuzov and Massena, leaders whose campaign baggage includes, well, baggages. Timon calls Timandra and Phrynia 'a brace of harlots,' also 'whores' and 'sluts.' They don't contest this trade description. Timon may have jumped to conclusions but he seems to have got it right. A present-day newsreader, drawing on the fashionable euphemism, might call them 'women working as prostitutes.' What does an editor call them?

In the old days, no problem. All the Fat Shakespeares agree that Timandra and Phrynia can be listed in the dramatis personae as 'Mistresses to Alcibiades.' The Arden 2 editor went along with the consensus. But Stanley Wells, editing the Oxford Shakespeare in 1986, was sensitive to the winds of change, and listed Timandra and Phrynia as 'whores accompanying Alcibiades.' The inoffensive 'whores' seems to have solved the problem. *Mistress*, as I guess, remains on the Index of banned words. The social ambiguity attendant upon 'mistress' is unsuited to camp followers. I should add that Bianca, in *Othello*, is invariably listed as a 'courtesan.' She seems to have more polish than Timandra and Phrynia, to be sure.

Also in *Timon of Athens*, I referred to Alcibiades as 'the necessary man,' which ran into the cult of 'person.' Alcibiades is the necessary *man*, I wrote back, because in this context *woman* is inconceivable. Or did Ancient Athens teem with aspirant female warlords, unjustly prevented from staging a military coup by oppressive male structures?

Another American copy-editor made a hilarious emendation to my sentence, 'Titus Andronicus is the spokesman for patriarchal

values.' The key word was changed to 'spokesperson.' Was Rome, I enquired, an equal-opportunity employer? Did the authorities sanction gender-neutral hiring practices? Could not a patriarch be spokesman for patriarchy? 'Spokesperson' (and later, 'spokespeople') is an absurd smuggling of contemporary values into a context where it makes no sense.

A levelling tendency was plain. Of the French Army in *Henry V*, for example, I wrote that 'there are no officers and no men,' which my copy-editor wanted to amend to 'there are no soldiers.' This missed the point. I used 'men' in the restricted English military sense ('officers and men'). There are no dramatic equivalents to Captain Gower and Michael Williams on the French side. 'Soldiers' doesn't improve matters, because the combatants are soldiers too. The root problem is *man* (*men*), a word that comes with flashing red lights.

To stay with *Henry V*, that's a play difficult for today's directors to feel at home with. The hero is a successful warlord, not at all the type one wants to encourage or glamorize. He threatens the civilian population of the besieged Harfleur with rape and pillage, once his troops are let off the leash. He orders French prisoners to be slaughtered. What is to be done to bring Henry within our fold? Cut, of course, but what else? Adrian Lester, the Henry for the National Theatre (2003), offered a curious take on the Agincourt address. 'He simply talks to his men and tells them that they are here to do a job, and that the job may go well for us, or it may not go well for us, but the point is the job and how we carry it out.' (*Players of Shakespeare 6*, p.159.) The key word here is 'job,' a word unknown to Shakespeare and not strikingly apt for fighting. As a Duty Manager's address to a group of disaffected council workers at the start of the day's toil, this approach might serve well enough. It hardly seems up to the onset of a great battle. When Lester says of the Agincourt address, 'it's not (even though it's always been

thought of as such) a particularly rousing speech,' we can be sure that he did his best to bring out the non-rousing qualities in 'This day is called the Feast of Crispian.'

As for the troops, did they not enlist for loot? As Pistol puts it in his coarse way, 'Let us to France, like horse-leeches, my boys,/To suck, to suck the very blood to suck!' (2.3.50-1) Nothing would give greater pain to Henry's soldiery than the thought that Harfleur would surrender, thus diminishing sharply the prospects of pillage. This is the primal fear that Captain Macmorris voices:

*By Chrish, law, tish ill done! The work ish give over, the trompet*
*sound the retreat. By my hand I swear, and my father's soul, the*
*work ish ill done! It ish give over. I would have blowed up the*
*town, so Chrish save me, law, in an hour. (3.2.80-4)*

You might argue that this is mere professional enthusiasm on the part of the Ulster explosives expert. (The name 'Macmorris' suggests that he comes from the Northern region of Ireland.) He has laid the train and wishes to set a match to it, as one does. But he goes on:

*So God sa' me, 'tis shame to stand still, it is shame, by my hand!*
*And there is throats to be cut, and works to be done, and there ish*
*nothing done, so Chrish sa' me, law! (3.2.101-4)*

'Throats to be cut' and the significantly blurred 'works to be done.' I think Captain Macmorris is missing not just the cathartic bang. The modern resonances of Macmorris's Lament are not hard to decipher. I have never seen them spelt out. They would offend too much in today's thought.

*Henry V* is the most intractable of all problems for

Shakespearean modernizers, but it is exceptional only in degree and intensity. Whatever Shakespeare’s own values, his characters do not always think like us. The attempt to coerce his plays into our own way of thinking may have a moment’s success, but the text recoils at the absurdity. *Shakespeare is not our contemporary*.